National Center for Lesbian Rights Asks Penn State to Stop Decades of Anti-Gay Harassment by Women's Basketball Coach Rene Portland

Contact:
Shannon Minter, Legal Director Minter@nclrights.org
Karen Doering, NCLR Regional Counsel doering@nclrights.org
Helen Carroll, NCLR Sports Coordinator carroll@nclrights.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 11, 2005

"Coach Portland's anti-gay recruiting methods and infamous 'no lesbians' policy has continued for nearly three decades… It's time for Penn State to step up and put an end to this overt illegal activity."

(PHILADELPHIA, PA) - The National Center for Lesbian Rights sent a letter on behalf of former Penn State women's basketball star Jennifer Harris to Penn State University President Graham Spanier today, demanding that action be taken against Lady Lions basketball coach Rene Portland for her decades-long policy of harassing players whom Coach Portland believed to be lesbians. Despite Harris' outstanding performance as a player during her two-year career at Penn State from 2003 to 2005, Coach Portland repeatedly questioned Harris about her sexual orientation, repeatedly threatened to kick Harris off the team if she found out Harris was a lesbian, and eventually told other players not to associate with Harris because she believed that Harris was gay. In 2005, Coach Portland abruptly told Harris to find somewhere else to play.

"My departure from Penn State was very painful," said Harris. "I struggled with whether I should just walk away and try to forget what happened. I finally realized that I could never put this incident behind me as long as other students were being subjected to the same sort of humiliation and discrimination I experienced from Coach Portland. In the end, I knew I had to speak out. Coach Portland very nearly destroyed not only my athletic career, but also my dream of completing my education and becoming a doctor. I do not want to see a single other student damaged in this way."

Jen Harris is a 6 foot guard from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Harris graduated in 2003 as the most decorated player in Central Dauphin High School history, and still holds the school record as all time leading scorer. Among other honors, Harris was named a 2003 McDonalds, WBCA, Nike, USA Today, and Blue Chip All-American, Gatorade 2003 Pennsylvania High School Player of the Year, and was a four year member of the National Honor Society and President's Academic Award recipient. Harris was also a star player Penn State, where she was among the Lady Lion's leading players on scores, assists and steals during her 2005 sophomore season.

"Because Coach Portland thought that I was gay, I was treated in a very demeaning manner," said Harris. "Coach Portland created an offensive, hostile and intimidating learning environment for players she believed were gay. She created divisiveness on the team by instructing players not to associate with other players she believed to be gay, or they would be kicked off the team also. Coach Portland's final insult was to exclude me from the 2004-2005 Awards Banquet, which all of my 2004-2005 Lady Lion basketball teammates were invited to attend."

This is not the first time Penn State has been asked to take action to stop Coach Portland's anti-gay crusade. Portland created a stir in 1986 after she told the Chicago Sun Times she does not allow lesbians on her team, and again in 1991 after Penn State officially added sexual orientation to the school's non-discrimination policy. Despite student protests and an alleged investigation into Portland's anti-gay conduct, Penn State has refused to take any action against Portland.

"Coach Portland's anti-gay recruiting methods and infamous 'no lesbians' policy has continued for nearly three decades. Coach Portland's behavior not only violates the school's anti-discrimination policy, it is

illegal. It is time for Penn State to step up and put an end to this overtly illegal activity," says Harris's attorney, NCLR Regional Counsel Karen Doering.

"It is particularly troubling that such flagrant homophobia is permitted to thrive at a school like Penn State, which has such a strong public commitment to diversity, tolerance, and eliminating hatred, violence, prejudice, and discrimination from the University community," said Helen Carroll, NCLR's Sports Coordinator. "Too often, powerful athletic departments are allowed to set their own standards of operation, with few or no consequences when they violate the policies of the larger institution. Coach Portland's actions have destroyed the careers of countless talented young athletes over the past thirty years. It is time for Penn State to stand up for its students and put a stop to this outrageous pattern of harassment."

Jen Harris has now taken her high powered game to James Madison University where she is coached by Kenny Brooks. Because of NCAA transfer rules, Harris must sit out the 2005-2006 season before she is eligible to play her junior and senior seasons.

NCLR is a national legal resource center with a primary commitment to advancing the rights and safety of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their families through a program of litigation, public policy advocacy, and public education. We can be reached through our website at www.nclrights.org.